

*"If only you recognized God's gift..."*

*-John 4:10*

# InFormation

Volume 5 Number 3  
May/June 1997

## Celibacy and Contemplation

*by Janet Ruffing, RSM*

IN MY OWN EXPERIENCE as a religious and as a spiritual director, the charism of celibacy is inextricably related to an on-going and progressive contemplative process. If celibacy has any valid meaning today, it is discovered not in sexual renunciation as a value in itself but as a rich and complex form of love of God and love of neighbor. The particular shape of our loves as religious men and women is, I believe, still unique. We profess in our vows a particular love and attachment for God, usually in Jesus, which is so often experienced mysteriously and inexplicably as a call, as some concrete and intense experience of the love of God being poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, that we find ourselves quite incapable of expressing that love any other way than in our religious consecration. As *Vita Consecrata* says, this is a "special gift of intimacy" with God (#16). The contemplative dimension of our celibate lives, our lives of prayer, is the primary place where we intentionally nurture and experience this mutuality of relating with God, a being in God, a living with God, and an on-going intimate shared life with God.

Although many of us in our own incorporation process heard similar words, I think we perhaps all know only too well, that many of us didn't have a clue about any form of intimate relating, let alone how to relate to the unfolding and encompassing mystery of God. Not only did many of us not have the skills of intimacy or the maturity of adult presence and relationship, many structures and patterns of living actually discouraged the development of those interpersonal skills which we now recognize as necessary for all of us to experience to some degree in order for relationship with friends or with God to satisfy our need for relationship.

Karl Rahner emphasized that there is an absolute unity between the love of God and the love of neighbor. At the deep core of any experience of love, either human or divine, is a union among our loves. We simply cannot really love God without loving all whom God loves--literally

everyone and the creation itself. Conversely, we cannot really love any other human being authentically without also loving God who resides at the core of the other. Our particular loves invite us into the deep mystery of God's love manifesting itself in and through our beloveds. Particular loves, when they are not closed in on themselves, open out into more universal forms of love. Likewise, a focused and intimate experience of God's love for us and our reciprocation of it, animates us and compels us toward a non-exclusive way of loving the particular persons whom our life circumstances bring into our lives. These, too, are particular loves; but they are neither exclusive nor permanent. They participate in a rich circulation of love given and received in ministry, in community living, in friendship, in formation, in mentoring and being mentored; however, they are all only for a time.

Because of the ebb and flow of these particular and non-exclusive celibate loves, the very grounding of our affective lives remains as Catherine McAuley describes, "centered in God for whom alone we go forward or stay back." For this affective grounding to have the ability to sustain us in apostolic and communal life, we must experience it as real presence, as real intimacy, as real relating. We learn these skills of relating both within the process of prayer and within the process of interpersonal relating. What we learn in one situation fortunately and unfortunately carries over to the other. Without some experiences of human intimacy, it is most unlikely we will experience intimacy with God. Without the divine-human intimacy of contemplative prayer, we may be quite unable to risk being ourselves with others.

Since formation directors have many psychological resources for learning the skills of intimacy themselves and for helping the women and men in the incorporation process to develop their relational skills still further, I will concentrate the rest of my reflections on the growing intimacy

### Inside this issue

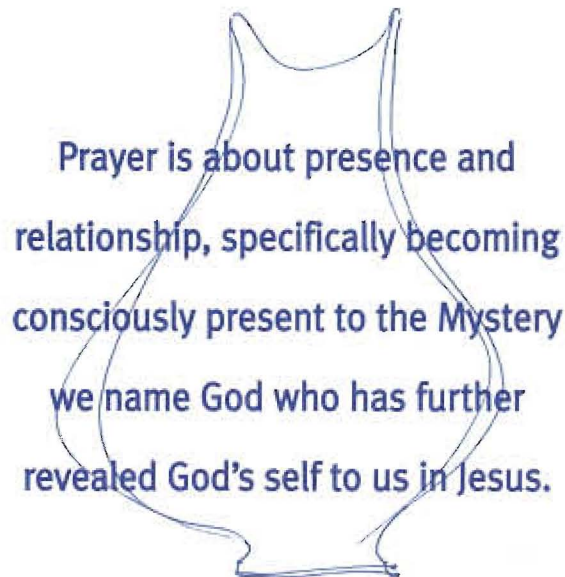
Celibacy and Contemplation .....	1
Beginning the Conversation.....	3
Seminar Spotlight.....	3
Media and the Interior Life .....	6
Take Note.....	9
New and of Interest.....	12

...the charism of  
celibacy is  
inextricably  
related to an  
on-going and  
progressive  
contemplative  
process.

*continued on next page*

with God that characterizes an on-going life of prayer for both newer and seasoned members.

Teresa of Avila spoke of prayer as "the intimate sharing between friends." Teresa knew what she was talking about. She was a lively conversationalist and enjoyed friends. Because friendships of all kinds were an important part of her personality, she gradually grew to discriminate among those friendships which supported her central religious quest and those which frustrated her mystical development. At the time in her life when these loves were more harmonious, she has a lovely vision which reveals how she had integrated her deep human loves with her all encompassing love for Christ. When she questioned her deep love for Garcia de Toledo, encouraging him in his apostolic life, she says: "I saw Christ with awesome majesty and glory showing great happiness over what was taking place. Thus he told me and wanted me to see clearly that he is always present in conversations like these and how much he is pleased when persons so delight in speaking of him." (Life, 34.17) Constance Fitzgerald, OCD, comments on this passage, "Now her God not only rejoiced in her human conversations and



loves, but understood her love and concern and compassion for others as an extension of the love that was flooding her life."<sup>1</sup>

#### Prayer As Presence and Relationship<sup>2</sup>

Prayer is any activity or passivity which enables relationship with God and our response to that on-going encounter. Prayer is then about presence and about relationship. It is not about making God present; God is already present in us by grace and active in our world. It is the process of opening ourselves to that presence which creates and transforms us. Thus it can encompass an enormous variety of styles, forms, and approaches. Our prayer changes as we change and as our sense of who God is changes. Although God remains incomprehensible mystery, God both fascinates us and frightens us. God has not given us an impossible task of fruitlessly searching in vain, but also draws near to us in invitation and self-disclosure. God entices us, but does not coerce us; allures us, but does not overpower us.

The mystics suggest that the mystery of God expands as one deepens in the spiritual life. Whatever our entry into initial conscious relationship with this mystery, God will gradually invite us into God's own Trinitarian life so that we, too, participate in the wholeness and joy of God's own life. As we give ourselves over to God, come to know ourselves and be known by God, we are inhabited by this mystery. God's own love and life and joy become our own. We are caught up into the love which comes from God and returns to God because that love dwells in us.

The journey of prayer makes conscious in us this participation in God's life which God is already doing but which requires our consent and participation to complete. Thus, prayer is about presence and relationship, specifically becoming consciously present to the Mystery we name God who has further revealed God's self to us in Jesus. As we grow more deeply into this relationship, more aspects of the God mystery encompass us.

I believe formation directors can encourage four basic dispositions that remain consistently important in our prayer. Here I look not so much at what happens to us in prayer but rather on what I believe we bring to prayer in both good times and challenging ones: intentionality, intimacy, surrender, and fidelity.

#### Intentionality

First of all, prayer is intentional. We attempt to make ourselves available for relationship with God with no other agenda. Intentional prayer differs from other types of religious experience which often happen spontaneously outside of prayer in that we have made a choice to open ourselves to God. Psychologically, prayer requires an attitude of openness, availability, a willingness to be influenced. We relax a bit from our compulsions, from our need to achieve, from our self-direction. We participate in "shifting gears," in entering another state of consciousness that is closer simply to being and

*continued on page 10*

**InFormation**  
Volume 5 Number 3 May/June 1997

**Editor** Jane Finnerty, OSU

**Associate Editor** Clare A. D'Auria, OSF

**Editorial Board** Margaret Fitzer, SSL  
Beth Fitzpatrick, O.Carm.  
Rea McDonnell, SSND  
Peter Schuessler, SDS

**Staff** Susan Plews, SSND

**InFormation** is published six times a year by the Religious Formation Conference, 8820 Cameron Street, Silver Spring, MD, 20910-4152 expressly for RFC congregational members. Phone (301) 588-4938; Fax (301) 585-7649; E-mail RelForCon@aol.com. For information about membership in the Conference, contact the National Office.

Articles in **InFormation** may be reprinted with attribution to Religious Formation Conference. Please cite the organization's address and send one copy to the National Office.

**Design and Layout:** Beth Ponticello, Center for Educational Design and Communication, 821 Varnum St., N.E. Washington, D.C. 20017.

**Art:** Madeleva Williams, CSJ

which is closer to our true selves. So we are intentional about being present, about being open, and about wanting to encounter God.

Regardless of what happens in our prayer, consistent choices to open ourselves to God bespeak a desire on our part to move more deeply into the experience of God and to be transformed in our consciousness, our values, our views, and our behaviors as a result of this encounter. It is a choice to spend time in prayer. It is a choice to be as intentional about this relationship as we are about others. Regardless of whether things are going well or poorly, the consistency of our intentionality is the least we can do to indicate to ourselves and to God that we care about how we are with God. Pragmatically, this intentionality serves as a counter-cultural support, reminding ourselves that we can neither grow in a faith-filled vision of life nor continue to live it without consciously fostering it. Our culture exerts too much pressure against the non-utilitarian dimensions of contemplative practice and too much encouragement toward self-centered self-interest.

Many of us do not  
experience intimacy  
with God because  
we do not really  
trust that we can  
both enjoy God and  
be safe with God.

### Intimacy

If prayer is about presence and relationship, it is a time in which we practice self-intimacy as well as inviting intimacy with God. According to Kay Leigh Hagan, "intimacy might be defined as the condition of knowing and being known at the level of our essential selves. . . . When we drop our masks, we have a feeling of connection, of being truly *known*. And although most of us want more intimacy in our lives, we regard it with profound ambivalence; we feel attracted to and repelled by it at once."

Intimacy with God is no different. It is often our "out-of-touchness" with ourselves which prevents our intimacy with God. We cannot feel or sense the connection with God because we are either unaware of how we are at this moment or we are afraid to find out. In prayer we bring our developed capacity for intimacy as well as our fear of it. Intimacy requires a mutual vulnerability and trust. Many of us do not experience intimacy with God because we do not really trust that we can both enjoy God and be safe with God.

Our intimacy with God will not deepen until we learn to face that which we fear or reject in ourselves as well as deal with whatever is impairing our ability to trust in God. One way our intimacy in prayer can stall is when we are unwilling to discover what we don't yet know about ourselves. There is a darkness within us which becomes accessible as we simultaneously allow ourselves to be seen and known and loved by God. If we keep the secret of our own darkness from ourselves, we cannot ever experience ourselves as fully accepted and loved by God. Our unwillingness to experience this part of ourselves drives us to keep God at a distance. Prayer may elude us because we don't want to bring this challenged self to prayer.

Ann Wilson Schaef identifies four key behaviors which interfere with intimacy: not taking responsibility, maintaining the illusion of control, being dishonest, and being self-centered. Growth in intimacy with God requires that we forego all of these behaviors. Intimacy suggests a mutuality. We deepen in our experience of the mystery of God when we shift our focus from our wants and needs to how things are with God. Do we ever ask to share the activities or experiences of God or Jesus? Or do we keep our focus on what we want or think we need. Can we simply allow ourselves to be in the Divine presence without demand or need?

Dishonesty most frequently happens because of a lack of congruence in ourselves. We try to pretend that we are OK when we are not. Or we pray for what we think we should pray for even if we don't want it. Or we are somehow dishonest because we are out of touch with ourselves and don't know it. This is why our prayer often improves when we can honestly admit to ourselves and to God how we are actually feeling even if we don't like having those feelings. It places us in a congruent relationship in which the feelings are now free to change or shift because they are owned and present. Difficulty with control is a major obstacle I will discuss under the rubric of surrender. Finally, taking responsibility for our own process and feelings enhances our freedom to be in relationship because we are not expecting the other to do what only we can.

Intimacy with God is entirely unique for each one of us. Some of us will find it desirable to express our feelings or present condition directly to God. The psalms are wonderful examples of this kind of feeling prayer: from complaint and lament to praise and thanksgiving. Others of us will not welcome such direct expression of feeling. There are many meditative techniques in which one simply sits and notices what is going on in one's consciousness. So instead of direct expression, we might simply notice what is coming up, what preoccupies us, how we are at this moment. Others may prefer an initial period of writing thoughts and feelings, addressing oneself more than addressing God and beginning prayer after that, when one is fully present to oneself.

Intimacy can not take place if we are not ourselves, if we are not present to who we are at this moment as well as willing to be in touch with deeper parts of ourselves that are not always available in the midst of our hectic daily round. Self-intimacy and intimacy with God eventually lead to the discov-

ery of the true self, the self beyond ego and beyond all of our usual descriptors of the self. Augustine says that God is more intimate to me than I am to myself. The depth of the self which comes into the encounter with God is our "intima mea," our deepest or most intimate self. And discovering that intimate self happens in our relationship with God.

This intimacy with God is not a one-way sharing. It tends toward a real mutuality with God. God shares God's self intimately with us. It includes not only how I am but how God wants to be with me. The mystics consistently describe mystical transformation as a real mutuality with God. God wants to be known and loved by us. To this end God companions us developmentally until we acquire the capacity to receive this Divine self-disclosure. This is described by Ignatius of Loyola as "a mutual sharing of goods" and by Catherine of Siena and Mechtilde as an exchange of love, and entrusting to oneself God's work in the world. The distance between God and human persons is overcome in this mutuality of relating.

### Surrender

Surrender is another key disposition in ourselves before God which is implied in both intentionality and intimacy. Intimacy is based on a trust deep enough to enable mutual surrender to one another. It is not a giving over of the self, but a joining of the self with another. It is the relinquishing of ego-security and ego-defense in the favor of becoming a we. Ultimately, prayer leads us to union with God which can only occur when our intimacy deepens to the point of surrender. It means the experienced awareness and yielding to God which acknowledges that God is our happiness and is wholly benevolent toward us--that God is God and we are not.

Each of us goes through a long journey of discovering this. Ego must ultimately surrender its self-interest and control to that which grounds it and gives it being. To surrender is to be centered on God and not on ourselves. Our intentionality in choosing to pray includes this willingness eventually to surrender our small selves to the mystery of God. This, of course, is a life-long process since the final surrender is the one we make when we die. The mystics suggest to us that they have achieved the deepest possible surrender to God this side of death itself.

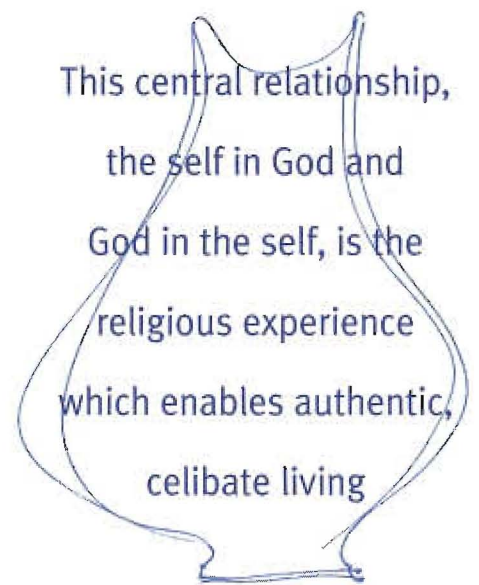
### Fidelity

The final disposition I want to reflect on is fidelity. Fidelity is not so much the regularity with which we pray although it certainly includes that. Rather it is fidelity to the relationship itself. Relationship with God entails more than time spent in prayer. Fidelity implies being true to ourselves and our deepest desires. It implies the willingness to take the next step--whatever that might be--as the mystery of God and the Christ life opens up within us. Fidelity is our persistence in staying in relationship with God. It means that, when we discover we are resisting, avoiding, or neglecting this availability to God, we humbly begin again.

Fidelity means being present to God or at least available with every major change in ourselves and our self-understanding. It means giving God the benefit of the doubt that God is on our side and not against us. If our images of God have become inadequate or if we recognize them to be positively destructive, fidelity means we struggle with God in the darkness and in unknowing until a newer or more adequate image emerges. Fidelity means returning again and again to God as the source and ground of our lives during and after every assault on that belief which occurs throughout our lives.

### Conclusion

What, then, does all of this have to do with celibacy? Prayer in this profoundly relational mode is the primary means for cultivating our core relationship with God from which all else flows. This central relationship, the self in God and God in the self, is the religious experience which enables authentic, celibate living. Authentic celibate living is expressed in both a contemplative attitude to life itself and a genuine expression of compassion



and care for others in ministry, in friendship, and in community.<sup>3</sup> The essence of contemplation is an experience of communion, a to and fro with God, an experience of the love of God being poured forth into our hearts. This communion of intimacy and relatedness expands to encompass every aspect of life, ceasing to be restricted to discrete times of personal prayer.

As this communion with all that is--an increased capacity to receive and appreciate THE REAL--manifests itself in every part of our lives, the fruition of celibate loving begins to be experienced. No part of life is untouched by this expanding relationship with the Divine Presence whether solitude, work, leisure, prayer, relationships, or ministry. Celibacy and contemplation are inextricably related to one another in the unity of love of God and love of neighbor and in the responsive capacity to apprehend reality with increasing clarity and compassion. ■

Janet Ruffing, RSM, Ph.D., is associate professor of spirituality in the Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education at Fordham University, New York.

### Endnotes

1. Constance Fitzgerald, OCD, "A Discipleships of Equals: Voices from the Tradition--Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross" in *A Discipleship of Equals: Towards a Christian Feminist Spirituality*, ed. by Francis A. Eigo (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1988) 82.
2. Much of what follows appeared in a slightly different form in *Living Prayer* (March/April, 1995) "As Refined by Fire," 4-7.
3. It would require another article to develop this single very important theme, namely, the contemplative experience of God in the midst of ministry and other non-prayer activities.